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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4358
INFO GULF WAR COLLECTIVE
AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 01795

E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR
TAGS: [ECON](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: A SYRIAN DIPLOMAT'S VIEW OF LIFE IN TEHRAN

11. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT

12. SUMMARY: SOME SUBJECTIVE IMPRESSIONS OF
LIFE IN THE IRANIAN CAPITAL FROM A SYRIAN DIPLOMAT
PAINT A GLOOMY PICTURE. END SUMMARY.

13. MR. HUSNI DIAB IS THE RECENTLY RETURNED SYRIAN
COMMERCIAL COUNSELOR IN TEHRAN (RETURNED TO
DAMASCUS MARCH 14). HE IS A SUNNI DAMASCENE OF
GOOD FAMILY WHO HAS SPENT THE BULK OF HIS CAREER
IN THE BANKING SECTOR, FIRST WORKING FOR PRIVATE
BANKS IN DAMASCUS, THEN FOR THE COMMERCIAL BANK
OF SYRIA AFTER THE NATIONALIZATION OF THE BANKING
SECTOR IN THE 1960S. PRIOR TO DEPARTING FOR HIS
MISSION IN TEHRAN, HE SPENT FOUR OR FIVE YEARS AT
THE MINISTRY OF ECONOMY AND FOREIGN TRADE, WORKING
WITH HIS OLD MENTOR AND UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR, MINISTER
OF ECONOMY AND FOREIGN TRADE, MOHAMMED IMADI
(WHO WAS ALSO MINISTER OF ECONOMY IN THE LATE
1970S). MR. DIAB HAS SPENT THE LAST FIVE YEARS
IN TEHRAN. HE IS ALSO A FORMER AID GRANTEE WHO
TRAINED WITH U.S. BANKS IN THE EARLY 1960S.

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14. LIFE UNDER THE SCUDS
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IN A TYPICAL, FATALISTIC WAY, DIAB SAID THAT DURING
THE RECENT PERIOD OF MISSILE ATTACKS HE PUT HIM-
SELF TO SLEEP AT NIGHT WITH A VALIUM. HE WENT ON
TO SAY THAT IT WAS NOT SO BAD DURING THE DAY WHEN
THE NOISE OF THE CITY WOULD DROWN OUT THE SOUND
OF DISTANT MISSILES FALLING. BUT IN THE QUIET OF
THE NIGHT, THE SOUND WAS ALL TOO CLEAR. DIAB
ESTIMATED THAT OF A POPULATION OF APPROXIMATELY
10 MILLION, ABOUT 30 PERCENT VACATED THE CITY AT
NIGHT. "THE WEALTHIER TEHRANIS GO AND STAY IN
THEIR SUMMER HOUSES OR WITH RELATIVES IN THE OUT-
LYING VILLAGES AND COUNTRYSIDE. ANYONE WITH A
CAR WILL DRIVE OUTSIDE OF THE CITY AND SLEEP IN
THE CAR OR CAMP."

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15. IRANIAN OFFICIALS
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DIAB SAID THAT THE TOP LEVEL IRANIAN OFFICIALS HE
DEALT WITH WERE INCOMPETENT AND UNTRAINED. MID-
LEVEL OFFICIALS, PARTICULARLY IN THE BUSINESS AND
ECONOMIC SECTORS, HAD OVERWHELMINGLY BEEN TRAINED
IN THE U.S. HE ADDED THAT HE FREQUENTLY PASSED
THE U.S. EMBASSY BUILDING ON HIS WAY TO AN ADJACENT
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE BUILDING. HE SAID THE PREMISES
ARE STILL MANNED BY REVOLUTIONARY GUARDS BUT NOT
USED. DIAB'S COMMENTS ON THE IRANIAN BUREAUCRACY
WERE SCATHING. "A SINGLE, SIMPLE TRANSACTION
CAN TAKE THREE OR FOUR MONTHS TO COMPLETE. TO
ACCOMPLISH ANYTHING REQUIRES AT LEAST THREE OR
FOUR SEPARATE TRANSACTIONS. THE IRANIAN BUREAU-
CRACY IS A NIGHTMARE TO DEAL WITH." CONSIDERING
THAT THE SYRIAN BUREAUCRACY'S PACE IS CLOSER TO
THE TORTOISE THAN THE HARE, THIS IS STRONG LANGUAGE
INDEED.

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16. IRANIAN TOURISTS IN SYRIA
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DIAB AGREED THAT THE IRANIAN GOVERNMENT PAYS SYRIAN GOVERNMENT \$250 PER TOURIST FOR A ONE WEEK TRIP TO SYRIA, INCLUDING FOOD AND TRANSPORTATION. HE SAID THE ARRANGEMENT IS FOR TWO THOUSAND TOURISTS PER WEEK. HE DENIED THAT FAMILIES OF MARTYRS ARE PROVIDED THIS TRIP AS A FREE BONUS. AT THE SAME TIME, HOWEVER, HE SAID THAT UNDER BLACK MARKET RATES FOR THE IRANIAN CURRENCY THE AVERAGE IRANIAN PAYS APPROXIMATELY \$80 FOR THE TOUR. HE SAID FOR THE MOST PART THE TRAVELERS ARE POOR VILLAGERS AND/OR RELIGIOUS ADHERENTS WHO ARE INTERESTED IN VISITING DAMASCUS' MOSQUES AND SHRINES. THE WEALTHIER IRANIANS, HE ADDED, PARTICULARLY NOW DURING THE ANNUAL FEAST OF NAWRUZ, ARE TRAVELING TO EUROPE, CANADA AND THE U.S.

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17. FUNDAMENTALISM
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DIAB WAXED PHILOSOPHICAL REGARDING THE CAUSES OF FUNDAMENTALISM IN IRAN. ESSENTIALLY, IT BOILED DOWN TO AN OPINION THAT THE SHAH IGNORED THE GROWING GAP BETWEEN THE SMALL WEALTHY ELITE AND THE GREAT MASS OF POOR. THE SHAH SHOULD HAVE DEVOTED MORE TIME AND MONEY TO PROVIDING ROADS, ELECTRICITY, CLEAN WATER AND EDUCATION TO THE MASSES AND NOT TO BEAUTIFYING EXCLUSIVE PARTS OF TEHRAN AND OTHER CITIES. THE POOR REACTED BY TURNING TO RELIGION AND THE REVOLUTION WAS BORN. NOW, EVEN FOR A FRIENDLY SYRIAN DIPLOMAT, LIFE IS DIFFICULT. THE BUREAUCRACY IS SLOW AND STUPID. THE ECONOMY IS IN TROUBLE AND THERE ARE SHORTAGES OF ALL KINDS. LAST, BUT NOT LEAST, THE SCUDS ARE FALLING.

18. WHEN DIAB RECEIVED WORD OF HIS REASSIGNMENT HOME, HIS COLLEAGUES IN THE EMBASSY CAME BY TO CONGRATULATE HIM. EVEN THE BENEFITS OF LIVING ABROAD ON A DOLLAR SALARY, APPARENTLY, DO NOT COMPENSATE FOR THE HARDSHIPS OF LIVING IN TEHRAN.

19. MINIMIZE CONSIDERED. EAGLETON